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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001696

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)
SUBJECT: KIM YOUNG-SAM PESSIMISTIC ON OUTLOOK FOR PRESIDENT
LEE, RELATIONS WITH JAPAN

REF: SEOUL 00862

Classified By: AMB Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In a farewell meeting with the Ambassador, former President Kim Young-sam freely voiced his opinions on the current administration's woes and on prospects for improved Korea-Japan relations; he was pessimistic about both. Kim said that current President Lee Myung-bak's problems were rooted in his lack of political experience and poor personnel choices. He reiterated that President Lee Myung-bak needs to make peace with political rival Park Geun-hye. Kim seemed vaguely regretful that he had backed Lee over Park, and questioned the President's competence in governing. Still a senior figure in the ruling party, Kim said he had met with a number of party leaders and Blue House officials, indicating that he expected to meet Park Geun-hye soon. Kim dismissed the idea that Korea-Japan relations could move forward as long as the Liancourt Rocks issue remained unresolved. The topic is so emotional for Koreans that there is no way to compartmentalize the volatile issue. End summary.

No "Magic Bullet" for MB

¶2. (C) In a house full of memorabilia of meetings with past presidents and world leaders, former President Kim Young-sam hosted Ambassador Vershbow for a farewell meeting on August ¶26. The spry ex-President said that President Lee Myung-bak (MB) is very unpopular these days -- in fact, his approval rating is the lowest ever for a Korean president this early in his term. MB's problems all stem from lack of experience, and politics is all about experience. Kim said he had met with President Lee recently and told him that picking the right personnel was the most important thing to succeed as president; he felt that poor personnel choices had caused most of Lee's problems. Kim said that the new Cabinet and Blue House officials, however, were disappointing and would not alleviate the public's concern. New appointments should excite, not disappoint the public. People have lost their faith in MB and there is no "magic bullet" for restoring public trust. Even if he came up with an economic stimulus package or some other set of policy initiatives, it would have little effect on his public approval rating.

¶3. (C) Repeating an assertion made in a previous meeting with the Ambassador (reftel), Kim said that Lee does not trust Park Geun-hye and does not want to meet with her. Kim

had told Grand National Party (GNP) Chairman Park Hee-tae that Lee and Park Geun-hye had to come to some sort of agreement. Nevertheless, even if their relationship is poor, factional strife will not be much of a problem in the National Assembly because Park agrees on the fundamentals. Kim, as the grandfather of conservative politics in Korea, frequently meets with GNP leaders and senior Blue House officials. He said he meets with President Lee from time to time, but not as frequently as he did before MB was elected because it would not be "appropriate." He also meets with Chung Chung-kil, MB's chief of staff, and with Park Hee-tae, the GNP leader. Kim seemed to be rethinking his earlier support for Lee, saying that he had previously thought Lee was slightly better than Park Geun-hye, but that he now questioned Lee's competence. Kim said he had heard that some of Park Geun-hye's confidants were urging her to meet with Kim -- something Kim thought would happen soon.

Deleterious "Dokdo"

¶4. (C) Kim saw little hope for improving Korea-Japan relations. He said the emotions Koreans harbor toward Japan will continue to be soured by the dispute over the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima). Because this issue remains unresolved, Korea and Japan will not be able to have closer relations. Kim said he thought the issue would go on "forever." Kim cited recent comments the Japanese Olympic baseball coach had made disparaging Korea's Gold Medal-winning team and Korea. Kim said that incident only reinforced Koreans' impression that the Japanese are

"wicked." Koreans were happy, Kim said, to have defeated Japan in the total number of Olympic gold medals -- Korea was seventh and Japan was eighth. It is okay for Korea to lose to other countries, but "we have to defeat Japan."

Comment

¶5. (C) Kim, an eight-term National Assembly member before he was elected President, is well aware of the benefit of experience. Not surprisingly, his support of the Korea-U.S. alliance and his dim view of Japan echo the opinions of his contemporaries. The GNP heavyweights are clearly doing their duty in seeking out the elder statesman, hinting that, already, the jockeying has begun for the 2012 presidential race. Kim has largely retired from politics, but his word still carries some political heft in the GNP stronghold region of Youngnam. Clearly Kim relishes giving advice to President Lee, but it is unclear if Lee is interested in listening. End Comment.
VERSHBOW